

HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF PALM DESERT
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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Marble, Alice

Interviewed By

Patricia Young

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INTERVIEWEE: ALICE MARBLE

INTERVIEWER: Patricia Young

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PY: This is an interview with Alice Marble at the Palm Desert Country Club for the Historical Society of Palm Desert Oral History Project by Patricia Young and it is January 28, Monday, 1980, at about two-thirty in the afternoon.

AM: When I was about seventeen, my teacher had some wealthy friends from the east, and they invited us to spend four days in Palm Springs at the old Desert Inn. And being an avid junior tennis player, I immediately got the pro to hit balls with me in. I had a little reputation. I was runner up of the national championship, and so he knew who we was, who I was, and we went out and hit balls. And a little girl about six years old, this was 1931, came out and said, "I bet you can't ride a bicycle and play tennis at the same time." And I said, of course,

I could, and the pro had a very good sense of publicity. And he got the photographer out. And it has a picture of me riding a bicycle in a red bathing suit on the course of the Desert Inn. And I have the picture, but I didn't get the little girl in it. And it was Shirley Temple. Forty years later I met Shirley at the U. N., and we were re-introduced and she said, "You rode a bicycle when I was six years old." So she remembered, too, which I think was a very cute story because that goes back a long time. That's before the racquet club and the tennis courts in Palm Springs. So that's my early history of . . . And then when I was twenty, I got TB in Europe on my first tennis tour and eventually came back to the desert. And my teacher managed the racquet club, and Todd and I worked in the shop. And got my health back and went east and won my first national championship. So it took me just about thirty years to get back to the desert. And I've loved it. I've lived here now for fourteen years, and I love it. It's just super. Wonderful people, wonderful climate. I had a long history of illness, but down here I've been so healthy, it's kind of unbelievable. And a little later on I had lived in New York for a time and I came back to

California. And this very old wealthy friend of mine, William Dupont, was looking for a vacation spot. He tried Europe, and he tried Jamaica and he tried the islands, and he finally, I said, why don't you try Palm Springs? So he came out after the war. It was about 1950 something. He came down to Palm Springs, and it was August. And he found this ranch which is at the corner of Washington and 111. And it was larger than he wanted, but he was able to cut it in half and buy half of it. And then eventually built his house. And all the pumps and all the things that were necessary. But since he lived in Wilmington, Delaware, he found it difficult, so he asked me to oversee it. So I started overseeing it in about 1956. And got the idea of taking pictures and sending them back to Delaware where he could make up his scrap-books and tell me what was going to happen next, and saw the house being built. And then he'd come out every year until it was built. A bunch of us would go to La Quinta Country Club and stay and play tennis and see the results. So actually from where I'm sitting right now looking out of the Palm Desert Country Club where I work, I saw this place grow because it wasn't open until about 1961 or 1962. So I saw it grow. And I said, some day

when I get old enough, because you have to be over fifty, I'll move here. Well, they've changed it from retirement center so here I am after fourteen years. So when I went back east in 1964, I spent a weekend with a friend at Mr. Dupont's house in Wilmington. And I told him that I was going to move to Palm Desert Country Club. And he, although he knew it a little bit, he still had the idea it was called an old lady's home. And I assured him that it wasn't, but he said, "Now look, you know all about citrus now," because he planted citrus. And he said, "Why don't I build a house for you on my property and then you can market the citrus and just be sort of here, you know, where I need somebody I can trust." And so I invited an old friend, who was a former tennis champion and who had painted many of his thoroughbred horses, and her name is Mary Kay Brown, and she was a champion before I was born, and a wonderful friend and tremendous portrait painter. And so I invited Brownie to share the house with me. So I lived out in the San Fernando Valley and she lived at the beach, and I'd pick her up every Monday morning and we'd drive down and spend about three or four days in the little guest house seeing the house being built. And he gave us carte blanche to

build whatever we wanted other than the fact that he wanted a Spanish house because he had every other type house around the country. So we built a beautiful thirty-six hundred square foot house with a pool outside my bedroom window and a tennis court out on the other side. Unfortunately, he didn't make any provision in his will and we moved in on the thirty-first of December of sixty-five and he died on, I guess it was the first of January. And the heirs said leave, and so we had to leave after we built this beautiful house. And neither Brownie nor I wanted anything that big, but he was going to leave it to his grandchildren. But we thought, well, we didn't invite all our poor friends and it wouldn't cost them anything to come to the desert during the season. And so we never got the house. It was heartbreaking. I think he would have been terribly upset because he knew how much I loved it down here. So there wasn't anything much we could do except to rent a house here at Palm Desert Country Club. And either she bought one of them, my friend had to leave and now I'm in my third house here. And it's enormously pleasant because I love to work. And I work up here and teach some of the high school kids to play tennis. And work with the pro, and work in the

shop part of the time. And it's just a lovely place to be. And that's sort of the history of my experience at Coachella Valley.

PY: Well, then you've actually seen it grow quite a bit, haven't you?

AM: Oh, heavenly days! My teacher and I, Eleanor Tenant, and I first came to be at the racquet club in 1935. Was just one main street. Palm Desert wasn't even thought of. One movie theatre, and I remember we lived over in an apartment over the drugstore. And the racquet club was just full of movie stars. But they came down to relax, and they were awfully good to me. They were, I was a fan of theirs, and they were a fan of mine. And won my first tournament here. The whole place just was in some kind of an uproar because they'd been rooting so hard for me to get over my tuberculosis. And to this day I still see some of the older ones. Most of them are gone. But like Bill Powell and Charlie Farrell and people like that, I'd hear from and see them occasionally. So it's fun. And the original owners, you know, that eventually bought the club. And once a year we've had a party, you know, an oldtimers party at the racquet club, which has been just great.

PY: What was this area like when you started building or overseeing I should say?

AM: The Palm Desert Country Club itself, or . . .

PY: Well, the country club because you watched that grow, and over at the La Quinta area you were.

AM: Yes, well, we were just on the way to La Quinta, you know. We were just at the corner of Washington and 111. And, of course, that's grown enormously. I mean there were two little motels, I remember. And, of course, people had their homes, but even the homes at La Quinta Country Club were relatively new. And, of course, our area here, we still have an original perimeter, but I don't know how many more houses were built right here on the property. Oh, gosh, I would say somewhere around five hundred homes. And more apartments and condominiums and things like that. So we were discussing, a bunch of us who had been here as long as I, that we kind of liked it better the other way. The traffic is so bad. We're not used to it now.

PY: When I spoke to Mr. and Mrs. Carl Gray, they were telling me that between Point Happy and where they are, that used to be quite a little thriving area in there. And that over the years Indian Wells has, that aspect of Indian

Wells has . . .

AM: Oh, yes, true. Let's see, I can't, I'm trying to think, there wasn't much between Point Happy and going that a way, whatever that a way is.

PY: East.

AM: East. They have so many now that are completely new, you know. I just don't remember when they were put up. Of course, I remember seeing the Indians also. Then the Balboa Bay Club being built up in the hill where I played a lot of tennis. And that wasn't there. Indian Wells was here when I first got here. Indian Wells Country Club. But the rest is real new.

PY: They were saying there's a mobile home park right next to Point Happy at one point.

AM: Oh, so there was. I'd forgotten all about that. That's right. And then the half the property that he sold after he bought the entire acreage was turned into very lovely homes. I have some friends who live over there, and I can't even think what they call it. Now it's something different than it was. Something Palms or whatever it is. No, very nice, very nice homes, and I don't even know to this day who owns, you know, who has Point Happy. You know, I've tried to get in several times just to see

it, but I don't know anybody over there. And it was a terrible disappointment, but then again I probably wouldn't have met all these hundreds of people that I now know here at Palm Desert Country Club. From the women's club to the garden club to the golf club where I played golf with the girls for seven years before I went back to playing tennis. And so we have a pretty nice bunch of people, and it's a marvelous place for widows like myself because you never have to be by yourself. You always have, let's go out for dinner or come and I'll make a pork chop or something like that. Because we have an awful lot of them, a lot of widows, here, whose husbands worked too hard and too long and died too young.

PY: You were doing other things besides playing tennis, I think, when you were around the desert area. You had become known for other achievements as well.

AM: Well, I had an awfully multi-faceted career because I did all the menial things when I was a kid, depression days. I'd gift wrap, gift wrapper, and soda jerk and fry cook and babysitter and just name it. Then I got, I went to school of design and learned to design clothes which I did for many years. Then I did about twenty-five

years of lecturing for a living because I'd had such a bad health history that they seemed to enjoy it. Did that at town halls and men's clubs and women's clubs and colleges and schools. And had a long war, lost my husband the last two weeks of the war. And I turned professional as soon as I made my little pocket full of money, so I don't have to worry too much about, and this very fine friend, Will Dupont, who gave me the job of overseeing his ranch and, of course, we lost it. But he just took my money when I made a lot and invested it. People say, why don't you sue the family, and I said, I can't sue the family of a man who set up a very handsome trust fund for me. Oh, of course, I don't know, everybody laughs around here because I'm easily the most popular resident at Palm Desert Country Club because they discovered that I'm a licensed bartender. And so when there's a seventy-fifth birthday or fiftieth anniversary, and bartenders are expensive, then they call me and say will you be an honored guest, but will you help us at the bar. So I'm much in demand.

PY: (laughter) Very good. That's very interesting. Anything else that you can think of about . . .

AM: This area?

PY: Yes.

AM: Well, I'm sad to say that so many of the ranches that I knew when I was down here, you know, for the whole season at the racquet club have gone, which is kind of . . . We had some marvelous friends, incidentally. One of them had part of this property. All of our streets are named for states except two. Alcorn, where that came from, and Warner Trail. And the Warner Trail is named after the Warner family who were Beechnut people who had a ranch alongside the Arkell family. They were related. And they both came down in the middle twenties and only just a few months ago they finally tore up the Arkell ranch which is another, we used to love to do, to get, my teacher thought the movie stars were spoiling me so she would come down to the Arkells and, you know, twenty miles in 1935, that was an awfully long way to drive. But we come down for dinner and we'd sit out in the date orchard and they'd cook steaks for us and visit. And they were very down to earth, lovely people. I miss things like that on the desert because so many of the older people are gone or died off. And all the new tracts and homes. It's not as easy as it used to be.

PY: How big was the Warner ranch? Someone else has talked

about that.

AM: I can't, I don't remember it. I remember the Arkell ranch better which was side by side. I remember it was a big house with a lot of small rooms, very Spanish, beautiful roof, I'll never forget because we patterned the house at Point Happy after the Arkell roof. Little swirling kind of, that you don't see anymore. And then they had this huge date ranch and in the front they have used this, I guess it was originally a pond. And they used that for irrigation, and then they got other methods of irrigation. So they used it as a swimming pool. So it was like fifty times the size of an olympic swimming pool and rounded. We used to have more fun swimming in that pool. And a lot of ranches were out in La Quinta that I remember. And when I first came down here, there were a lot of them that still were there. It was so marvelous because they'd bring over avocados and all the citrus in the world. And you name it, dates and figs and all this, and early asparagus and, oh, we just were always loaded with the goodies.

PY: That's wonderful. Do you remember much about the construction of this house and who was involved with it? For instance, some people have talked about Joe Valenzuela

in La Quinta who did a lot of tile work around here.

AM: These were, we had a fellow who lived on Mr. Dupont's ranch named Jack Hicks. And he was sort of the general builder or the repairman for the ranch because there must have been a dozen houses, you know, the little date house where you stayed. Then there was his house, the bigger one, and just small little places that had been there three years. And Mr. Dupont fixed up this little date house where they used to store the dates. And made it into a two-bedroom place with a little kitchen. And it was just darling to stay in. They had no plans. We drew, Brownie and I, Brownie knew more, she'd built many houses. I'd never built a house. I knew what I wanted for me, and she knew what she wanted for her, which is a beautiful statue in the front of the house. And she wanted, you know, a studio, north studio, which she got. And I just wanted the swimming pool and the tennis court. And we had a marvelous *Kitchen* I remember it cost me seventy-five dollars to line the cabinets. And that's the thing that I got most annoyed that I had to leave my seventy-five dollars' worth of stickum paper. And then we had, it was three bedrooms, four bedrooms, four baths, a huge den, and a formal living room. And we even had the idea

to have a beautiful portrait that was done in England forty years ago. And we had a little light in the wall that came down and rested on the portrait.

PY: Oh, boy!

AM: Hi, Paul.

: Hi.

TAPE 1, SIDE 2:

AM: Oh, that's all right. What else?

PY: What you're saying is marvelous.

AM: Thank you.

PY: Talking about the house.

AM: It was a beautiful, it was, as I say, the walls must have been four feet thick adobe. And even in the summertime I remember them putting the roof on it. And you know how hot it is in July and with the smell of the tar and all this. We could sit in that house and not need any air conditioning whatsoever. This is the way they used to build the old adobe houses before people had air conditioning. So it was, and the only thing that was bad, it was right under the mountain so the sun went down at three o'clock. But it was just a beautifully designed house. And the workmen, I don't know, everybody from the

man who stained the walls and the doors. And the plasterers, and they just did everything that Brownie wanted them to. And they were the top cream of the crop here on the desert. And we all got to be enormous friends. Every time we came down, we'd have a beer party for them. You know, sitting on the lumber, telling tall tales. I think they literally cried when we lost the ranch. They were so disappointed because they did everything for Brownie and me. I think they were sadder than we were.

PY: How did you find them in the first place?

AM: Find what?

PY: All these craftsmen.

AM: Oh, these were all done by Jack Hicks, the man who works, contractor.

PY: Oh.

AM: He knew all the, he'd lived here for many years, and he knew all the best people. Bill was one and Clarence was another. And I can't remember their name, but they were just a great bunch. And they were so proud of their work. Does that interfere?

PY: What?

AM: Is that going to interfere?